

I
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*Growing Closer and Stronger
through Life's Defining Moments*

DAVE HARVEY



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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For my grandchildren,
Ava, Juliette, Weston, Giovanni,
and eventually, by God's grace, the others—
still unborn and known only to God.
This book is written with the prayer that each
of you will be captivated by Jesus
and experience the exhilaration, spark,
and gritty grace of a marriage that lasts a lifetime.

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STARTING T♥GETHER

Your Journey through Defining Moments

Marriage is not a thing ordained by men. We know that God is the author of it, and that it is solemnized in his name. The Scripture says that it is a holy covenant, and therefore calls it divine.

John Calvin¹

Books are great. As a pastor, I have an office filled with them. I've even read some of them. In fact, I've read enough to know there are more good books than spare time to read. This can be maddening.

Since this book explores the uncommon theme of “defining moments” in marriage, you need to know whether these pages connect to your reality right here, right now.

A good book at the right time is a wise companion. It's like a Sherpa for the mind, guiding you up mountains toward maturity—right to the place where God is calling you to go. Good books often

1. Cited in John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 484.

carry tools we don't even know we need. But they're embedded there in the text, ready for our use when the right moment comes.

A bad book—or one that's read at the wrong moment—can be a waste of time. Its impact never jumps the gap between the author's words and your heart.

With this in mind, let me help you decide whether this book deserves your investment right now.

To do so, I need to tell you a story.

Over ten years ago, I published a book titled *When Sinners Say "I Do."* In that work, I explored marriage as the union of two people who walk down the aisle toting suitcases behind them. New husbands and wives carry the baggage of their lives up to that moment. They carry all the things that shaped them into who they are and all the things that impact what they want out of marriage. But that's not all. Packed in tightly among their hopes, dreams, and family history is their sin.

Imagine going through airport security with enough weapons stashed to start a small revolution. Then imagine the TSA just waving you through, allowing you to skip the inspection completely. Pretty unthinkable, huh? Yet our sin luggage is rarely opened and inspected before our marriage. As a result, the honeymoon and first years can add to the weight we carry. Pretty soon the luggage flies open and our baggage spills out all over each other.

When Kimm and I were first married, I remember being baffled by the ways I behaved and the conflicts we experienced. I remember thinking, "What's happening here? Am I possessed? Or wait . . . is *she* possessed? Oh Lord, is our marriage cursed? I mean, if marriage is so good, why do we seem to make each other feel so bad?"

Over time we discovered that saying "I do" is a defining experience. Getting married opens your luggage. And when that happens, the sin inside can foul the air and soil the relationship. To ignore sin's reality and potency is to deny the very reason Jesus lived, died, and rose on the third day. So I wrote *When Sinners Say "I Do"* (*WSSID*) to help couples—engaged, newlywed, or in

crisis—to understand that when sin becomes bitter, Christ becomes sweet.² And marriage gets pretty sweet too.

After When Sinners Say “I Do”

Ten years after *WSSID* was published, Kimm and I celebrated our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. The milestone prompted me to reflect upon the feedback I’ve received about that first book. Some readers talked about specific chapters as important moments in their understanding of marriage. But most often the audience was a premarital group, or newlyweds, or folks experiencing some crisis in marriage because they never laid proper foundations.

So I got to thinking, As marriages grow and age, what defining moments do they experience? What are the unique points of trouble and transformation that visit us as our marriages mature—as we navigate the realities of job and financial challenges, keep our heads above water in the kiddie years, raise teenagers or adult children, empty the nest, suffer, age, or prepare for final good-byes?

What moments define a durable marriage?

The more I’ve reflected on this, the more I’ve sensed a deep burden to circle back to you with *I Still Do*, a fresh and time-tested perspective on how needs, desires, sin, and gospel applications change as couples move beyond the newlywed years.

For one thing, I’ve learned that something more than our sin is exposed when we say “I do.” Yes, the luggage of our sin required God to become a man and spill his precious blood as the only remedy. But the baggage we bring into our marriage represents more than our sin.

You see, the strength of my first book was also its weakness. I did well to help young couples unpack the undisclosed baggage of their sin. But sinfulness, while central, isn’t the only thing that

2. Cf. Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance, Useful for These Times*, Vintage Puritan Series (1668; repr., Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2016), eBook, loc. 466 of 1421.

impacts a couple's marital union. As Kimm and I stacked up more and more anniversaries, we began to see these other influences—factors that could not readily be ascribed to our sinful hearts.

Here's one example.

Expressing emotion has never come easy for me. I'm not talking here about the typical "guy thing," though it's true that some men would rather be dragged naked across broken glass than appear to be weak or macho-lite. No, my lack of emotion is much worse. It's something more primal, more visceral. For some reason I struggle

to access and define my feelings while I instinctively cap emotional displays. When I came into marriage, I thought denying my emotions was a good thing and conveying them was bad.

Ladies, how would you like to be married to a piece of work like that?

Where did my avoidance of emotions come from? Was it a maneuver of my active, sinful heart I'd developed to avoid repenting from selfishness? Maybe. But

assuming my avoidance of emotions was the result of sin didn't bottom it out for me. I needed to get in touch with a part of myself that seemed genetically coded in my constitution. I explored and confessed my control issues, but my feelings remained concealed, floating out of reach behind an impenetrable fog.

How could Kimm possibly feel treasured unless light pierced my emotional darkness? And if my visceral reaction to emotional displays wasn't just a result of willful sin, what could it be? My thoughts moved from my heart to my childhood home.

She Married a Harvey

My dad was a steelworker, just like his father before him. He was also a veteran of the Korean War, and he grew up in a home where

Yes, the luggage of our sin required God to become a man and spill his precious blood as the only remedy. But the baggage we bring into our marriage represents more than our sin.

he never knew his birth father. If there was a scale of one to ten for measuring emotional responsiveness, Dad would have scored somewhere around “can’t find a pulse.” I may have seen him cry once—that day when Franco Harris snatched a deflected football to propel the Steelers to victory over the Raiders and clinch a berth in the 1972 AFC championship. I still think the real miracle in the “Immaculate Reception” was the way it broke the dam of emotions pent up in steelworkers all over Pittsburgh.

My mom’s tribe came from Scotland, and I think her clan had the disciplined worker genes rather than jovial beer drinker genes. Some of my early memories of Mom include her deck of three-by-five-inch index cards filled with “to do” lists for the kids. I learned to read from those index cards. By eight years of age, I knew how to set a table, dust with Pledge, and apply Liquid Gold to baseboards in a way that didn’t stain the carpet.

We weren’t feelers. We were doers. It was hardwired into our Harvey DNA.

My parents certainly loved me in their own way, but love wasn’t conveyed through an emotional vocabulary. I can’t begin to describe my gratitude for growing up in a stable two-parent family where my mom and dad modeled hard work, thrift, determination, and a committed marriage. Like all families, however, we had our dysfunctions.

Ours revolved around this realm of emotions. We lived relatively unaware of our inner world, how the past impacted our present, or how our present circumstances were affecting us. There was no venturing deeply into the feelings of others. Heck, we didn’t see a need for it! Love in our home was expressed by doing, not by some flowery concept like “being.” And this came to shape my understanding of healthy personhood as a young man. My definition of health did not include identifying or discussing emotions.

I still remember my wedding day, as my brother Wayne and I waited in the church basement for the ceremony to start. As we sat silently, just staring at each other, a stampede of emotions

suddenly rushed to my brain like a herd of crazed cattle. This may shock you, but I spontaneously broke down and wept uncontrollably . . . for about fifteen seconds. It was one of the most startling experiences of my life, so out of character that it was creepy.

When I was done, Wayne looked at me and said, “What in the world was that?”

I stared back, utterly bewildered. “Honestly,” I stammered, regaining my composure, “I have no idea.”

But that wasn’t completely honest. Somewhere in my mind I suspected the outburst had something to do with my wedding that day. (*Really, Dave, you think?*)

To this day I live incredibly grateful for the advantages my parents and upbringing conferred on me. But I know now that my emotional disconnect is a weakness in my life and a deficit in my marriage. And as I look at my past, I have to honestly acknowledge that my home was a powerful shaping influence on the way I process emotions. I don’t blame my parents or feel like I was robbed. I’m certain they were raised in even more emotionally constricted climates. In fact, I’m pretty sure our home was a Burning Man festival compared to the way they were raised.

We often encounter weaknesses or personality differences in marriage and instantly try to moralize them.

My point, then, is not to assign culpability for our lack of emotion. Rather, I want to help you identify profound factors that shape *your* marriage—influences that can’t so easily be traced back to sinful desires. We often encounter weaknesses or personality differences in marriage and

instantly try to moralize them. We assign motives and then ascribe sin to our spouse’s actions and omissions. But cultivating a durable marriage involves recognizing that our brokenness is broader than sin. In my case, brokenness included an emotionally stunted home that left a large imprint on the way I experienced and expressed feelings.

Through Life's Defining Moments

To thrive in marriage over the long haul, we need to care for our spouse as a whole person. That means seeing how God's good news speaks not only to their sin but also to their suffering, weakness, family history, disappointed dreams, physical limitations, and changes in sexual appetite. Lasting marriages need more than just luggage sorting. They need to know how Jesus can help them navigate the complexities of growing older together.

Over the years Kimm and I have had some marriage-defining moments where we just didn't know what to do. Those experiences have often determined our progress and sometimes, quite honestly, have marked points where we plateaued. We learned that falling in love is easy; remaining in love is something entirely different. Kimm and I have often looked back and thought, *Gee, it would have been really nice to know that sooner!*

I'm writing this book to tell you about some of those defining moments—the life-changing experiences, events, and decisions that determine (and sometimes alter) your whole direction. The quote at the outset of this first chapter reminds us that marriage is ordained by God. Yet all the defining moments *throughout* marriage are God things as well; an experience or season in life when God

- presents a decision for truth,
- requires a cost,
- offers a Christ-exalting opportunity,
- grows the soul,
- determines our destination.

I've put a defining moment statement at the head of each of this book's remaining chapters. Some of these statements—such as “Brokenness Is Broader Than Sin,” “Sex Changes with Age,” or “When Grace Conquers Your Wasted Moments”—may take you

by surprise. But each marks a time that is crucial and defining—moments that ultimately give voice to our fear, frustration, and desperation. Each of these moments becomes an invitation from God to transform the core of our being and to deepen our intimacy with our spouse.

Admittedly, most of life is made up of pretty ordinary days where big moments don't exactly break into our monotony. We're not superheroes, spies, or sports stars who have one shining moment to rise above the routines of life. There are no gold medals for what we do. Our days are occupied with carpools, careers, and colon checks. Moments in our world feel pretty ordinary. Growth is about applying truth over time; it's a long, slow obedience.

But the need for ordinary endurance does not eliminate the reality of defining moments.

God presents such moments in the life of every couple. They become doorways to new insights or trailheads that redirect our paths. Some of these invitations will be self-evident; others will be downright astonishing. But one thing remains certain. How we respond to these moments in marriage determines whether we stumble along separately or move forward together toward maturity. As Charles Spurgeon soberly observed, "Failure at a crucial moment may mar the entire outcome of a life."³

Perhaps now you're starting to think this book may be important or even essential for you.

I've written it because I don't want you to miss these crucial moments.

Back to You

If you're holding this book with the hope of going the distance with your spouse, then I want to invite you into a journey. If you read *When Sinners Say "I Do,"* consider this a ten-year checkup.

3. Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 161.

I'm no expert, and I'm not married to one either. But I'm a husband and a pastor with three-and-a-half decades logged in both roles. More importantly, I think you may discover in these pages that you and I are pretty similar—far more than you may realize.

Maybe your marriage has become merely functional, operating like a small business in the service of teenagers, occupations, or retirement goals. Maybe you are in the midst of a marriage crisis, just fighting to hang on to your vows. Or maybe you're maturing gracefully from one season to the next. Whatever your situation, I want to give you a new and time-tested perspective about how God may use these defining moments to make your marriage more resilient, more robust, and altogether more durable.

Really, I just want to write to you about what Kimm and I have learned, and I want you to see how Jesus makes the difference for every decade. He meets us in every defining moment of marriage.

If that sounds like it could help you, then I think this book is worth your time.